

Language on the Camino



"Tower of Babel" by Marten van Valckenborch I (1534-1612), Staatsgemäldegalerie Dresden

Several people have inquired why I use the term *Castellano* rather than *Español* when discussing the language used most widely in Spain. I gave a partial answer to that question in my essay on Medieval Music, but the question has prompted me to spend a little time examining the whole issue of language and the pilgrimage. It turns out to be a complex subject. This is the first of several meditations on language I hope to post.

A number of years ago I was traveling around India, and mostly the issue of language did not arise for at that time on the subcontinent one was never too far from a local inhabitant who had at least a few useful words (useful for a traveler in any case) of English at her or his command, undoubtedly a legacy of the British Empire. Then one day I decided to take a daytrip by ferry to an offshore island near the city of Cochin in Kerala. I disembarked and walked for an hour or so, turning numerous corners, when I suddenly realized that I had no idea of how to get back to the ferry pier. No problem, I thought, ask someone or look for a sign (many directional signs elsewhere in India at that time were still in English). But the signs I saw were all in the beautiful but for me completely indecipherable script used by the local language Malayalam, and no one I spoke to gave any indication of understanding English. For a few minutes I felt what it is like to be illiterate in a strange land, the terror of being totally lost. I soon reminded myself that the island was small, and dead reckoning navigation would eventually get me back to the ferry. As it happened, a few minutes later I chanced upon a pictographic sign with an arrow and a cartoon of a boat and was soon enough back at the pier, a little ashamed of myself. My terror was quite minimal in the event, for I had money, an American Express card, a passport, and every expectation of being lost for only a few hours at most.

The medieval pilgrim, unless he (or quite rarely she) was educated and fluent in Latin, must have felt something like that terror not too long after leaving home. And the terror would last for weeks

or even months as the pilgrim walked ever westward, and further from home, toward *finis terrae*, the end of the earth. Languages could shift radically over only a few tens of kilometers as one regional dialect merged into another or a linguistic frontier was crossed. A devout Pole on a pilgrimage beginning in Krakow would pass through four linguistic zones, Slavic, Germanic, Romance and Basque, at least six major languages (Polish, German, French, Basque, Castellano, and Galego), and an almost uncountable number of dialectic versions of those languages before reaching Santiago. Some of those dialects were so different as to be all but mutually unintelligible despite their common base. The German of the Brandenburg marches in eastern Prussia was nearly impossible for the Bavarian to understand, and the French of Paris in the region of the langue d'Oï was unintelligible for many speakers of the langue d'Oc in the south of France. Our Polish pilgrim would pass through all of those zones.¹

In mountainous areas villages on opposite sides of a pass might speak mutually unintelligible languages or dialects, and small pockets of relict language not closely related to any language spoken nearby were not uncommon. Several of those pockets still exist in modern Europe, including two our Polish pilgrim might have encountered--Sorb, a Slavic tongue, spoken by a small population in the east central part of Germany and Romansch in Switzerland (that encounter is somewhat unlikely, as a typical route from Poland to Spain would have passed much further to the North and West, avoiding the Swiss mountains where Romansch is spoken). On a larger scale, Basque, a language totally unrelated to any other European language, was a relic of people resident in the region long before the Roman Empire and the various invasions of people into Iberia from the North and East. Some linguists have even speculated that the Basques, who have some distinctive genetic markers differentiating them from other Spaniards and Frenchmen, may be remnants of a Cro Magnon population, people who came to Europe before the last ice age and thousands of years before the ancestors of most modern Europeans arrived.

Our Polish pilgrim undoubtedly banded with others from his homeland going to Santiago, and collectively they may have had some ability to communicate in one or more of the German, French, or Spanish dialects, but it is certain they would have had to pass through territory where none of them could understand what was being said or speak with hope of being understood (at a minimum the Basque region, for then, as now, almost no non-Basques knew or could use that tongue, a language that has proven fiendishly difficult for those not taught to speak it as children). If the pilgrim group was lucky, a priest or other religious fluent in Latin might accompany them. That would ease the way anywhere there was a church or monastery, for most priests, many monks and some nuns could use Latin for purposes other than just participation in masses. In the countryside many kilometers from the nearest village, however, there was only the local peasantry speaking the dialect peculiar to the region.

The problem of language was a little less difficult in cities, for cities tended to be cosmopolitan, and the commerce they depended upon required some linguistic versatility. If our medieval Polish pilgrim was from the large (for its time) and sophisticated city of Krakow, he probably understood and perhaps even spoke some German. German was the, to use a slightly incongruous term, *lingua franca* (its literal translation is "language of the Franks" or "French language") of trade and commerce in Northern Europe, and use of German (really Plattdeutsch or low German, the language of the Hanseatic merchants whose focal points were the north German ports of Lübeck, Hamburg and Bremen but whose commercial enterprise stretched from Byzantium and Sicily to Arctic Norway and from London to the eastern end of the Baltic and beyond) was all but universal in trade. In the later middle ages the Jewish population scattered among almost every

¹ Germany as a unified state dates only to the 19th century. I am using the term to refer to all the various units that eventually merged to form the modern state, ones where some dialect of German was spoken.

city, town and large village east of Germany itself used the Germanic dialect or language (opinions differ as to how to classify it) of Yiddish. Although Yiddish is usually written with Hebraic characters, its spoken form is quite similar to Hochdeutsch (modern standard German, originally the dialect of the middle part of Germany). In interactions too complicated to elaborate in a short essay, almost everyone in Poland, and further east within the Pale in Ukraine and Russia, encountered Jewish craftspeople, merchants, money lenders and traders, and thus they were accustomed to hearing Yiddish. Through contact with Yiddish even a Polish peasant who was able to make the pilgrimage to Santiago might speak, or at least understand, a few words of German.

By the high middle ages students traveled from all over Europe to Paris, creating the Latin Quarter, near what became the Sorbonne, the district named because Latin was the *lingua franca* (in France!) of those foreign students. Mostly they were in Paris to study theology, law, or medicine, and the language for all of those professions was Latin, as it still is in part. But few of those students failed to learn at least a little French, if only to avoid being cheated by landlords and merchants. As a sign of sophistication, when the students returned home they often took French with them and spoke it to each other, a secret language of an exclusive fraternity. French itself did not become a *lingua franca* until rather later when French wealth and political influence, and the wonderful French flair for style and luxury, made it the language of the wealthy and powerful over most of Europe.² Certainly its early use by students returned from Paris and other French universities helped French later to achieve its fashionable status. They also made use of French possible far beyond the borders of French speaking Europe.

Speaking and listening were problems, but there were always signs, right? We live in what one critic has called a “forest of signs,” and the impoverished semiologic environment, at least of written signs, in the Middle Ages, or indeed in all ages until the last half of the nineteenth century, is difficult for us to comprehend. Those of us who have been educated and are literate in a western European language, and in Europe that means virtually everyone over age 15, assume signs everywhere—advertising signs, announcements, warnings, and directional signs using words are such a normal part of our existence that we easily forget there was an age when those were few indeed. In the Middle Ages signs using written language would have been nearly worthless, for only a small fraction of the population was literate, as little as 4-5 per cent at some times and in some places. A sign giving the name, the distance and the direction to the next town on the Camino in words and Arabic numerals would have been as useful to most medieval pilgrims as the signs in Malayalam were to me in Kerala. The pilgrims might have found the signs beautiful to look at but almost useless as guides for their journey.

How then were pilgrims guided? The answer is at least a twofold one. One part is the expansion of the monastery system along the Camino. The Benedictine monks of Cluny were a cosmopolitan lot, for Cluny attracted mendicants from throughout Europe. Some of the Cluniac monks were dispatched to sites along the Camino in order to establish new monasteries with the goal of assisting pilgrims. Our Polish pilgrim spending the night, in Cluny itself or in one of the other hostals the order maintained was likely to encounter a countryman or at the least a monk who knew some Polish. The joy and relief at finding someone who spoke his native language and knew and could provide assistance for travel along the Camino must have been indescribable!

A second help for the pilgrim was in the form of signs using pictographs and symbols, signs just like the pictograph that got me back to the ferry in Kerala or the yellow arrows we now depend

² There is an old Danish saying that a nobleman speaks French to his wife, colleagues and friends, German to his dog, and Danish to his peasants.

upon to lead us to Santiago. A few of those early Camino signs still exist, the cruceros scattered along the Camino. More on that subject in a later posting.



Crucero: ruinas cerca de Najera
© E. O. Pederson 2005

© [E. O. Pederson](#)

2005